

"Altogether, I cannot help thinking that in point of atrocity my murder of Uncle William has seldom been excelled."

AMBROSE BIERCE.

[MY FAVOURITE MURDER is included among a collection of Short Stories by Ambrose Bierce, entitled *Can Such Things Be?*—to be published shortly by John and Horace Cowley. Copyright in the United States and Canada, 1897, by Ambrose Bierce.]



## DEATH.

HER husband was dying, and she was alone with him. Nothing could surpass the desolation of her surroundings; she and the man who was going from her were in the third floor back of a New York boarding-house. It was summer and the other boarders were in the country; all the servants except the cook had been dismissed, and she, when not working, slept profoundly on the fifth floor. The landlady was out of town on a brief holiday.

The window was open to admit the torpid air. No sound rose from the row of long narrow yards, nor from the tall houses annexed. The depth of the houses deadened the roar of the streets. At regular intervals the distant Elevated lumbered protestingly along, its grunts and screams muffled by the hot suspended ocean.

The woman sat there plunged in the profoundest grief that assaults the souls of Earthians. In all other agony hope flickers, however forlornly; but when that something which, never seeing, we have known and loved, slips, still invisible, from the body through which it has so pitifully striven to express itself, to be engulfed in the blank that borders the finite, then do we wonder at the

"T. P. is magnificent! Stimulated by the example of His Royal Highness the Count of Turin he sought revenge upon Mr. John Cowley, the editor of *The Anti-Philistine*, which can be no ordinary publication, for it has set the blood of the O'Connors bubbling. Mr. Cowley took the liberty of allud-

egoism of the mortal spark, and its brief resignation to live; the only consolation possible is in a second and still more personal visitation of Death.

Miriam gazed dully at the unconscious form of the man who had been friend and companion and lover during five years of youth too vigorous and hopeful to be warped by uneven fortune. It was wasted by disease; the face was shrunken; the night garment hung loosely about a body which had never been disfigured by flesh, but had been muscular with exercise and full blooded with health. She was glad that the body was changed; glad that its beauty too had gone some other where than into a coffin. She had loved his hands, as apart from himself, loved their strong warm magnetism. They lay limp and yellow on the quilt; she knew that they were already cold and that the moisture was gathering on them. Something convulsed within her, pinching her heart and lungs. *They had gone too.* She repeated the words twice, and after them, *for ever.* And the while the sweetness of their pressure came back to her.

She leaned over him suddenly. He was in there still, somewhere. *Where?* If he had not ceased to breathe, the Ego, the Soul, the Mortal, was still in the sodden clay which had shaped to give it speech. Why should it not make itself manifest to her? Was it still conscious—in there—unable to project itself through the disintegrating matter which was the only medium its Creator had vouchsafed it? Did it struggle there, seeing her agony, sharing it, longing for the complete disorganisation which should put an end to the torment? She called his name, she even shook him slightly, mad to tear the body apart and find her mate; yet with scorching brain struggling to warn her that violence must hasten his going.

ing to Mr. O'Connor in plain terms. The correspondence abruptly ends, and we are left in irritating darkness. Whether Mr. O'Connor is still using his shillalah, or whether his 'representative' has actually called on Mr. Cowley to arrange for a bloodthirsty combat, we know not."—MANCHESTER EVENING CHRONICLE.

The dying man took no notice of her. She opened his gown and put her cheek to his heart, calling him again. There had never been more perfect union : how could the bond be still so strong if he were not at the other end of it? He was there, her other part : until dead he must be living. There was no intermediate state. Why should he be as entombed and disregarding as though the screws were in the lid? The slowly beating heart did not quicken beneath her lips. She flung out her arms, describing eccentric lines, above, about him, rapidly opening and closing her hands as if to clutch some escaping object ; then sprang to her feet and went to the window. She feared madness ; she had asked to be left alone with her dying husband, and she did not wish to lose her reason and shriek a crowd of callous people about her.

The green plots in the yards were not apparent, she noted. Something heavy, like a pall, rested on them. Then she understood that the day was over and that night was coming. There were lights in several of the houses ; silhouettes against the blinds. In one window the blinds had not been drawn. A cook was moving sluggishly about, preparing dinner.

Miriam returned swiftly to the bedside, wondering if she had remained away hours, or seconds, and if he were dead. His face was still obvious, and Death had not relaxed it. She laid her own against it, then withdrew with shuddering flesh, her teeth smiting each other as if an icy wind had passed.

She let herself fall back in her chair, clasping her hands against her heart, watching with expanded eyes the sculptured face, which in the gathering dark was becoming less defined of outline. She would not light the gas to draw the stinging things of night and eat the

"The *Anti-Philistine* is the name of the newest addition to English periodicals, and a distinctly new one it is in reality. It is in book shape, and for sixpence gives a lot of reading of a particularly novel and unconventional character. The first instalment by a very distinguished writer,

little air that fed him. And she did not want to see the opening eye, the falling jaw.

Her vision became so fixed that at length she saw nothing. She closed her eyes and waited for the moisture to rise and relieve the strain. When she opened them his face had disappeared ; the humid waves above the housetops buried the star shafts ; and night was come.

Fearfully, she approached her ear to his lips. He still breathed. She made a motion as if to kiss him, then threw herself back, pressing her hands against her lips.

His breathing was so faint that in her half-reclining position she could not hear it, could not be made aware of the moment of his death. She extended her arm resolutely and laid her hand on his heart. Not only must she feel his going, but so strong had been the comradeship between them, it was a matter of loving honour to stand by him to the last.

She sat there in the hot heavy night, pressing her hand hard against the ebbing tide of the unseen, and awaited Death. Suddenly an odd fancy possessed her. Where was Death? Why was he tarrying? Who was detaining him? From what quarter would he come? He was taking his leisure, drawing near with footsteps as slow as those of men keeping time to a funeral march. She remembered the music that was always turned on at the theatre when the heroine was about to appear, or something momentous to happen. She had thought that sort of thing inartistic. So had he.

She drew her brows together angrily, wondering at her levity, and pressed her relaxed palm against the heart it kept guard over. The sweat broke from her face ; but in a moment the pent-up breath burst from her lungs. He still lived.

Stanley Waterloo, tells the story of an unfaithful wife, and of how a wrathful husband had his revenge on the man who outraged the honour of his domestic hearth. The ghastly trick was performed by a savage dog of the Ulm breed, 'a cur by day and a demon by night,' whom the indignant

Once more the fancy wanted above the stunned heart. Death—*Where* was he? What a singular experience: to be sitting alone in a big house—she knew that Jane had stolen out—waiting for Death to come and snatch her husband from her. No; he would not snatch, he would steal his prey. The theft would be as stealthy as the approach of Sin to Innocence . . . he was an invisible, unfair, sneaking enemy, with whom no man's arm could grapple. If he would only come like a man and take his chance like a man. Women had been known to reach the hearts of giants with the dagger's point. But Death would creep upon her.

She gave a hoarse cry of horror. Something was creeping over the window sill. Her limbs palsied, but she struggled to her feet and looked back, her eyes dragged about against her own volition. Two small green stars glared menacingly at her, just above the sill; then something behind, and evidently possessing them, leaped downward; and the stars disappeared.

The obsession lasted only an instant, but she realised that she was thoroughly frightened. "Is it possible?" she thought. "Am I afraid of Death? and of Death that has not yet come? I have always been rather brave for a woman. He used to call me heroic; but then with him it was impossible to be afraid of anything. And I begged them to leave me alone with him as the last of earthly boons. Oh, shame!"

But she was still quaking as she resumed her seat, and laid her hand again on his heart. She wished that she had asked Jane to sit outside the door, or that there was a bell in the room. To call would be worse than desecrating the house of God, and she would not leave him for a moment. To return and find him dead—gone alone!

Her knees smote each other. It was idle to reason;

husband had trained to fly at night at a stuffed figure of a man dressed in the habiliments of a 'friend,' and seize it by the throat. The periodical is all cleverness. It is fresh, vigorous, pungent, and, so far, anti-sham. In giving a free rein to fresh minds with ideas not formed in the rut of con-

she was very near to abject terror. Her eyes rolled apprehensively about; she wondered if she should see It when It came; wondered how far off It was now. Not very far: the heart was barely pulsing. She had heard of the passive power of the corpse to drive brave men to frenzy, and had wondered, having no morbid horror of the dead. But this! To wait—and wait—and wait—perhaps for hours—past the midnight—on into the ghostly dawn—while that awful, determined, leisurely Something stole nearer—and nearer.

With a spasm of anger she bent to him who had been her protector. Where was the indomitable spirit, the splendid vitality that had held her all these years in strong and loving clasp? How could he leave her? How could he desert her? Her head fell back and rolled against the cushion; she moaned with the agony of loss, recalling him as he had been. But in a moment fear again took possession, and she sat, erect, rigid, breathless.

Suddenly, far down in the house, on the first floor, her straining ear took note of a sound—a wary muffled sound, as if someone were creeping up the stair, fearful of being heard. Slowly! It seemed to count a hundred between the laying down of each foot. She gave an hysterical gasp. Where was the slow music?

Her face, her body, was wet—as if from the breaking of a wave of death-sweat. There was a stiff sensation at the roots of her hair. She wondered if it were really standing erect. But she could not raise her hand to ascertain. Possibly it was only the colouring matter freezing and bleaching. Her muscles were flabby; her nerves twitched helplessly.

She knew that it was Death who was coming to her through the deserted silent house: knew that it was the

ventionalism, it will do good as to the diffusion of anti-cant ideas. In the July number a very remarkable letter in favour of the re-enactment of the C. D. Laws is one of the features. The general stand-point of the periodical is good, but in protesting against particular 'evils,' which it is likely not to



sensitive ear of her intelligence that heard him, not the dull coarse-grained ear of her body.

He toiled up the stair painfully, as if he were old and tired with much work. But *how* could he afford to loiter, with all the work he had to do? Every minute, every second he must be in demand to hook his hard cold finger about a soul trying to escape from its putrefying tenement. But probably he had his emissaries, his minions. For only those worthy of the honour did he come in person.

He reached the first landing and crept like a cat down the hall to the next stair, then crawled slowly up as before. Light as the footfalls were the feet were squarely planted, unfaltering; slow, they never halted.

Automatically she raised her jerking hand and pressed it against the heart: its beats were almost done. They would finish, she calculated, just as those footfalls paused beside the bed.

She was no longer a human being, loving and suffering; she was an Intelligence with an Ear. Not a sound came from without; even the Elevated seemed to be temporarily off duty; but inside the big quiet house that soft footfall was waxing louder, louder, until iron feet crashed on iron stairs, and echoes thundered.

She had counted the steps—one—two—three—irritated beyond endurance at the long deliberate pauses between. As with slow precision they climbed and clanged, she continued to count, inaudibly but with equal precision, noting their hollow reverberation. How many steps had the stair? She wished she knew. No need! The stupendous tramping announced the lessening distance in an increasing volume of sound that would have brought joy to a man under the knife of an enemy. It turned the curve. It reached the landing. It advanced

understand it will be at the mercy of flippant cynics, who wish to be notorious, and who act accordingly, without regard for the interests of truth and justice. We hope to give a little attention to the next number of this periodical, which promises to have something of interest for Irish readers."—FREEMAN'S JOURNAL.

—slowly—down the hall. It paused before her door. A moment of eternities, and knuckles of iron shook the frail panel. Miriam's nerveless tongue gave no invitation. The knocking became more imperious; the very walls vibrated. The handle turned, swiftly and firmly. With a wild instinctive movement she flung herself into the arms of her husband.

When Jane opened the door and entered the room she found a dead woman lying across a dead man.

GERTRUDE ATHERTON.

[DEATH is included among a collection of short stories by Gertrude Atherton, entitled "THE SPANGLE OF EXISTENCE," to be published shortly by John and Horace Cowley. Copyright in the United States of America and Canada, 1897, by Gertrude Atherton.]



## THE STORY OF ALCA.

[A posthumous poem, now for the first time published in England. Longfellow, after reading this and other poems of Francis Saltus in manuscript, wrote, "The poems ring with the clarion note of genius."]

NOW in the city was a gentle maid,  
Alca by name, who whiled away the hours  
Petting her buds and wreathing wreaths of flowers  
Within her father's dwelling, in the shade.

He was a warrior stationed on the walls,  
And gave his daughter his large share of spoil,  
So that her dainty fingers might not toil,  
So that she might spill perfume in her halls.